

# The Educational Panopticon

## *Teachers College Record*

by Herbert Kohl — January 08, 2009

People who insult and denigrate teachers by forcing scripted curriculum on them are perfectly aware that they are forcing teachers to act against their conscience and students to close down their minds. What must be raised and answered for is the moral cost of creating joyless schools that resemble panopticons.

I find it painful to write about education these days. I began teaching in 1962 and after about one semester realized that I would have to become engaged in school reform if I was to teach well and be of use to my students.. This engagement has continued for forty-six years and yet I still encounter schools that are as repressive and ineffective as they were forty-six years ago. Sometimes I even encounter situations, which are even more depressing than any I remember.

Recently a friend and I visited a middle school in the Bay Area. It was lunchtime and the students were lined up outside of the cafeteria. I noticed that they all had their arms folded over their chests with their hands clutching their shoulders. My friend got really upset and suggested we leave immediately. I asked her what was wrong, and she told me that the lunch line was identical to lunch lines she observed when she visited prisons. The inmates were required to hold their arms that way to prevent them from touching each other or carrying anything into the dining hall. Later I asked a teacher at the school about the rationale for having the students line up in that way, and he gave me the same reason. According to him, the students, all of whom were either black or Latino, had to be kept from touching each other or fooling around on the lunch line and besides, he commented, "it's also good education for their future."

I observed a similar phenomenon in an elementary school a few weeks ago, only this time it was a class of second graders required to walk to the playground with their arms folded across their chests. The rationale I was given by an administrator was the same though without the cynical aside. In both instances the official reason for the policy was that it was part of the school's zero tolerance policy.

The majority of schools don't resort to such methods of behavioral control and do sanction some informal movement of youngsters from place to place. However, the notion of control and surveillance is pervasive these days.. I believe that the consequence of scripted curriculum, teacher accountability, continuous monitoring of student performance, high stakes testing, and punishment for not reaching external standards is that schools become educational panopticons, that is, total control and surveillance communities dedicated to undermining the imagination, creativity, intelligence, and autonomy of students and teachers.

"Panopticon" was the name given by the British philosopher and legal theorist Jeremy Bentham to a prison he designed during the 1780s. Essentially it consisted of prisoners' cells built in a circle around a surveillance core in the middle. The idea was to provide complete monitoring of prisoners at all times by guards within the core. Prisoners were unable to see into the core and therefore could not actually tell whether they were being observed or not. The motive for this was to create an environment where the prisoners would internalize and accept the idea of total and continuous surveillance whether or not it was actually happening. It was an attempt to use the physical environment as an instrument of intimidation and mind control.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault extended the use of "panopticon" to characterize social institutions such as prisons, hospitals, mental asylums, and schools which institutionalize constant

surveillance and exert mind control, often without the knowledge or awareness of the people being controlled. When I talk about an educational panopticon I mean a system in which teachers and students are under constant scrutiny, allowed no choice over what is learned or taught, evaluated continuously, and punished for what is considered inadequate performance. In this context students and teachers are forced to live in a constant state of anxiety, self-doubt, wariness, anomie, and even suppressed rage.

Consider the following characteristics of schooling that I mentioned above: scripted curriculum, teacher accountability, continuous monitoring of student performance, high stakes testing, and punishment for not meeting external standards. Scripted curriculum turns teachers into mechanical delivery systems. Most teachers I know try to revolt against them, but they have to face what are called “the Open Court police” – people who wander the halls of schools checking that teachers are on exactly the mandated page, asking set questions rather than discussing ideas or texts, and accepting only the answers provided by the teachers’ booklet. Though those monitors obviously can’t check all the classes at all the times they induce a state of anxiety since they can enter any classroom at any time without even knocking. This aspect of the panopticon contributes to the erosion of self-respect and pride in one’s work by treating teachers as objects with no independent educational knowledge and judgment of their own.

The irony is that even with the imposition of so-called “teacher-proof” curriculum, teachers are evaluated on the effectiveness of their student’s performance on tests relating to material they have no control over. No one evaluates Open Court or other such curriculum when students fail. It is the powerless “proofed” teachers who take the hit. This is morally reprehensible and yet the question of the values underlying this kind of teaching and evaluation is neglected when experts discuss educational issues.

Teachers under surveillance are also the agents of surveillance since they are expected to do continuous monitoring of their students’ progress. Continuous monitoring implies that learning takes place in measurable increments and that constant testing somehow contributes to enhanced performance.. Whether it does or not, it reinforces educational practice which has no space for conversation, exploration, or the personalization of learning. The classroom becomes a humanly impoverished environment, a sanitized place where students’ personality, charm, and ingenuity have no place. Morally it contributes to depriving the young of opportunities for the development of their minds. Fortunately there are many subversive teachers who work in the service of their students and according to their own conscience rather than submit to the coercive education they are expected to provide.

Add high stakes testing and school-wide punishment for failure and you have even greater weapons of control and coercion. Student and parent anxiety is increased; teachers, being judged themselves by the results of the tests, have incentives to press and pressure their students to perform or even in some cases encourage them to be absent on testing days. Because of no tolerance and no exceptions policies, students who just can’t do well because of disabilities that are no fault of their own, or students who don’t speak English, are forced to take tests they know they will fail. Setting students up to fail is simply immoral, and yet there is surprisingly little outcry about this attack on these young people’s very being.

When I bring up these moral issues to educators who consider themselves reformers in the spirit of No Child Left Behind, they usually acknowledge these “unfortunate” things can happen but that they are unintended consequences of a program designed to get every child performing to high standards. That is not the case. These alienating immoral practices are intended consequences. People who make and administer high stakes tests know the moral and personal costs of subjecting all students to them. People who insult and denigrate teachers by forcing scripted curriculum on them are perfectly aware that they are forcing teachers to act against their conscience and students to close down their minds. What must be raised and answered for is the moral cost of creating joyless schools that resemble panopticons.

I believe in high standards of literacy. I believe that students are capable of high and sophisticated levels of thinking and writing. I believe that children's imaginations and intelligence must be engaged in their learning. And I believe that respect for persons, for teachers and students, is at the core of good education. Consequently it is up to those of us who care about the moral quality of life in the school to question the values at the core of current pseudo-school reform and refuse to accept dehumanizing, damaging, and morally questionable schooling.

Cite This Article as: Teachers College Record, Date Published: January 08, 2009  
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 15477, Date Accessed: 3/6/2009 9:12:45 AM